



Diaspora Groups in Peace Processes: Lessons Learned and Potential for Engagement by the EU

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Background

On 29 May 2012, a group of experts, policy makers, researchers and civil society representatives gathered in an ‘Africa Briefing’ in Brussels to discuss the engagement of diaspora groups in peace-building processes.

The role of diasporas as facilitators, supporters or promoters of conflict resolution has only recently become a field of study and policy action. Even if experts and practitioners seem to agree that these groups can have potential positive impacts on peace and security issues in their home countries, various dimensions of the topic remain unclear and require further research.

This ‘Africa Briefing’ offered an opportunity to tackle some of the key questions of this emerging field, and in particular: how can African diasporas promote peace in their countries of origin? And: how can the European Union engage diasporas as part of its strategy in the field of peace and security in the region?

An emerging field

Establishing the composition and exact number of diaspora populations is not an easy task. In addition to the transnational and de-materialised character of these groups, there is also a conceptual problem: the number of individuals belonging to a given diaspora depends on the definition one attributes to it. Even reaching adequate, operative definitions is also somewhat complicated, especially when diasporas are considered ‘agents’ operating in complex conflict prone environments.

This briefing’s debates partly focused on Dr. Vorrath’s definition, according to which diaspora is a ‘transnational, non-state formation defined as an (ethnic) minority group residing outside the country of origin while maintaining links and connections with the homeland’. Several aspects were discussed: diasporas’ composition and ‘limits’ (who is and who is not part of the diaspora?); the reasons for leaving (or the will to return to) the homeland as relevant variables; the inclusion of the so-called ‘second’ and ‘third generation’ in the definition. Some participants emphasised the need to explore further the “links and connections” that are said to bind these groups to their respective countries of origin – and to each other.

Over the past two decades, numerous studies have examined the mechanisms and dynamics by which diaspora groups may impact home and host societies. Hence, diasporas have been connected to a series of transnational activities/actions, such as promoting development, strengthening trade relations, and supporting economic transfers (notably via remittances and loans). Diaspora studies have also highlighted these groups’ capacity to facilitate technology and human capital exchange, training and knowledge sharing.

As diasporas are believed to channel norms, beliefs and ideas from ‘one side to the other’, their role as vectors of cultural expressions and political claims was also examined. Evidence from research and policy initiatives indicate that diaspora groups may indeed at times have an influence on the processes of social and political transformation in both their countries of origin and their host societies. Mobilisation, lobbying and advocacy are some of the activities most commonly linked to diasporas as transnational political actors.

Despite this upsurge of interest and research, the role of transnational (ethnic) minority groups on peace and security issues has received little attention. Participants were reminded that existing studies tend to stress the potentially disruptive – at best counterproductive – effect of diasporas in homeland conflicts. Indeed, diasporas do not always place peace and dialogue very high on the agenda. On the contrary, they can support belligerent methods in order to realise radical political/ideological goals.

These analyses, though important, tend, however, to overlook diasporas' capacity to play a constructive part in peace-building processes. Experts agreed that the potential is high, and that diasporas should be called on to play more prominent roles in the peace and security field. Field experience with youngsters (often 'second generation') of Pakistani and Afghan origin living in Europe indicate, for instance, that they can play a positive role in promoting dialogue between home and host countries, and also within different groups in homeland societies.

Diaspora groups are also said to play constructive roles in sub-Saharan Africa, which has been the theatre of numerous armed conflicts over the past decades. Well-developed and highly interconnected, sub-Saharan African diasporas are already known for their capacity to engender positive results in the homeland's economy, society and politics. The growing importance of sub-Saharan African diasporas has led many countries in the region to set up entire ministries dedicated to facilitating more effective engagement with their citizens living abroad. Participants highlighted the cases of the Congolese, Eritrean and the South-Sudanese diasporas. Based in Europe or North America, these groups excel in the promotion of cultural and economic exchanges, as well as assisting development.

It was also pointed out that both the EU and member states' governments have developed a number of initiatives in the area of engaging diaspora groups as full partners. The relative success of these programmes, and diasporas' strong connections with governments, armed groups and the civil society, underpin their potential to become strategic partners in peace-building and conflict resolution processes.

Diasporas: potential vectors for transnational dialogue

Over the past decades, Europe has become an 'immigration' continent, hosting migrants from different parts of the world, in particular sub-Saharan Africa. Rough estimations indicate that diaspora groups from sub-Saharan Africa may number between 3.5 and 8 million people in Europe. The large number involved transforms these transnational groups into a potentially important resource for and within the continent. Placed at the crossroads of different cultural, political and social environments, it was again stressed that diasporas have grown in importance in recent years, especially for their alleged capacity to play a role – as 'actors' - in several areas of international (and national) politics.

Experts reminded participants that individuals belonging to diasporas may not hold dual citizenship, but they can be considered *de facto* 'double citizens'. Their multiple allegiances imply they possess a unique understanding of the different polities to which they are connected. This seems particularly true for the so-called second and third 'migrant' generation. As they are born in host countries, but retain strong ties with their parents' (or grand-parents') countries of origin, second and third generations tend to identify with transnational sets of norms and values, and thereby develop multiple (or 'travelling')

identities. Multiple senses of ‘belonging’ and compound identities mean these individuals are hence uniquely placed to foster connections between ‘home’ and ‘host’ countries.

Challenges and limitations: diasporas for war or peace?

However, participants also warned that diasporas are not a panacea for complex conflict situations. As in the fields of economy and development, diasporas should be considered as only one of the engaging actors, collaborating with others in a global, concerted strategy. Diasporas should not be seen as substitutes for developing effective state institutions, operative governments, or consistent public policy funding, planning and implementation.

In the peace and security field in particular, a number of factors can considerably impair diasporas’ legitimacy and capacity to act (and be seen) as true/fair supporters of dialogue and peace.

Diaspora members or groups may for instance have hidden agendas, in which the continuation or even aggravation of homeland conflict (instead of its settlement) are the real goal. They may also be part of the opposition (or government) groups in exile, or be still overly sensitive to certain issues, especially when the memories of conflict are too vivid. The potential existence of internal competition for resources and leadership among different groups may also eventually contribute to the weakening of diasporas’ positions altogether.

Armed groups, governments or the civil society in home countries may be reluctant to accept diasporas’ authority and mediation. In some cases, diaspora groups can be perceived as ‘foreigners’, already too distant from the hardship of the conflict to take a part in the peace settlements, or voice the concerns of those ‘who have stayed’. Likewise, even upon returning to home countries, diaspora members may continue to be isolated, for they may be perceived as having been less concerned by the consequences of the conflict – or the failure of the peace-building processes.

The ‘double allegiance’ of diaspora members represents another important limitation, since their loyalty may be questioned both in home countries (where they may be perceived as representatives of external actors or not fully dedicated to the country’s interest) and simultaneously in host societies, where certain groups may have doubts about their capacity to abide by the values, norms and policy goals they support.

With reference to the Pakistani diaspora in Europe, experts drew attention to another important challenge: the fact that diaspora groups could also ‘import’ homeland conflicts into host societies – notably when homeland conflict involves clashes among different ethnic or religious groups. In this situation, home societies might become the theatre of ethnic, religious or political struggles which they have only a very limited capacity to influence as they are actually taking place elsewhere. This transnationalisation of conflict, though not common, may eventually transform some diaspora groups in threats to host countries’ security, instead of partners in international initiatives of conflict resolution.

Suspicion and scepticism surrounding diasporas’ goals and intentions can, however, be partially overcome through field experience and research in similar fields. Indeed, some studies indicate that the better a given group is integrated in host societies, the better it is positioned to engage in developments initiatives – a hypothesis that could be extended to the peace and security field.

How to engage and with whom?

Participants pointed out that people dealing with peace-building and diasporas may sometimes make wrong assumptions: viewing external actors (such as international governments, organisations and the EU) as ‘teachers’, who communicate the ‘virtues of peace’ (or development, political stability, and so forth) to other countries/societies. From this perspective, diasporas only reproduce peace-promoting discourses and initiatives which are pre-defined externally, and have little capacity to produce and/or promote their own.

Stronger analyses are therefore needed in order to challenge these false assumptions and clearly demonstrate how the work of diasporas can make a difference in the peace and security field. More systematic studies are also required to help alleviate scepticism among EU officials. As experts stressed, such scepticism seems to be the cause of many of the missed opportunities to further engage diasporas in peace work at the EU level. As pointed out during the debates, sometimes, as in the case of Eritrea, despite the EU’s strong relations with both the governments of the home countries and different diaspora groups, the Union is still not be able to fully engage them in peace-building processes.

Therefore, the important question remains: with whom should governments, institutions and the EU engage to further diasporas’ role in peace initiatives? The challenges of selecting legitimate diaspora groups seem quite similar to those present when dealing with civil society groups in general. Faced with the vast array of possible partners, how can one identify those with genuine capacities and that are properly representative?

The usefulness of umbrella institutions was discussed, though no clear, final position could be reached. While some participants praised their importance (as de-materialised networks, diasporas can do very little, and some institutionalisation is therefore needed in order to improve their capacity to act on the ground), others stressed that umbrella organisations may sometimes introduce unnecessary hierarchies, making processes less fluid and eventually less efficient.

Based on desk-research/case-study analysis, two basic criteria were offered to help the selection of diaspora groups in contexts of peace-building and conflict resolution.

- 1) The group’s capacity to influence homeland conflict.
- 2) The group’s motivation for promoting peace.

In other words, the greater the capacity of the group to influence the conflict, the greater the chance it could be effectively mobilised (provided the motivation for involvement is sound) during peace-building and conflict resolution processes. These two variables are, moreover, ‘shaped’ by the context, i.e. the opportunity and incentive structures offered by both home and host countries at a given moment.

Experts exchanged views on how to assess the real ‘capacity’ and ‘motivation’ of diaspora groups. Even when one possesses full knowledge of the conflict, actors and the dynamics taking place at a local level, this kind of assessment remains very difficult to make. It is even harder for actors lacking (linguistic, cultural, political) skills and material capacity.

As stated by the experts present, diasporas’ ideological, political goals and motivations may also evolve over time, and become quite different from the ones initially stated and/or

identified. In this way, a certain group which supported dialogue and peaceful transition at a given moment, may radicalise its position as/if the conflict worsens. What is more, some groups may have quite positive goals and take peace-oriented actions, but end up engendering rather negative (violence-laden) effects on the ground.

Selecting the diaspora groups to deal with therefore requires a dynamic assessment of the groups' intentions, goals and actions. Such analysis should be able to grasp how these groups' motivation and methods evolve over time – i.e. as the conflict in question unfolds. A careful analysis of the country's history, as well as the background and context of the conflict are moreover highly recommended. Depending on the nature of the conflict and actors involved, the groups/institutions asked to participate in dialogue and conflict-resolution should logically be as varied as possible.

Some 'intermediary cases' - notably groups with high peace-making motivation, but lower capacity/skills - can sometimes become effective partners once they receive adequate training and resources. External institutions, national governments and the EU could subsequently benefit from the strong motivation (and legitimacy) of these groups by offering capacity-training and reinforcing the capabilities they have developed. However, it was also pointed out that the processes involved in passing on knowledge and transferring skills are not without challenges. Some individuals and groups may not return to their respective home countries (when the training is delivered elsewhere), or may apply their new skills and material to achieve other goals than those initially agreed upon.

Another interesting example of 'intermediary case' are diaspora groups who are disconnected from the international 'peace-building circles' and/or may lack stronger, institutionalised links with local peace-oriented groups. Here, the role of EU delegations should be highlighted, as they could facilitate contact and promote better connections between these groups and actors working on peace and conflict resolution at both the international and national/local level.

There are indeed a number of opportunities available to the EU to escape the traditional 'hard diplomacy' instruments in the field of peace and security. Making better use of the mechanisms offered by the Joint Africa EU Strategy (JAES) framework could be, as underlined by participants, a good start.

Moreover, the EU, as well as member states, could work more closely with younger generations, notably by financing internships and/or scholarships in the countries of origins of their parents or grand-parents. Policy initiatives in Norway indicate second and third generation can effectively 'liaise' societies and institutions from different countries, promote more positive approaches to dealing with conflict situations and thereby help to foster peace.